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This past February (2019), the General Conference of the United Methodist Church met in St. Louis. The primary item on the agenda was the existing language in “The Book of Discipline” regarding sexual ethics. After much debate and controversy, over 800 delegates cast their votes. Fifty-three percent favored retaining the language, and forty-seven percent voted against it, revealing how evenly divided the denomination is on this issue. At the time of this writing, it is unclear how the dissenters will proceed, but it is unlikely that the issue will go away or that unity will be the long-term result.

As many have observed, the identity crisis that the United Methodist Church and many other Christian fellowships seem to be facing is due, in large part, to a crisis of authority. Is Scripture the primary authority, and how is it brought to bear on the controversial issues of our day? This question is fundamental to the life and faith of the church and is pertinent to a wide range of topics. Because of the relevance of this question, this issue of *Christian Studies* is devoted to the theme of authority for Christian faith and practice. And this question is of utmost importance. Where does our authority for faith and practice lie? What are the proper sources for theology? What are the standards for evaluating different theologies? What should they be? What role does the greater historic tradition of the church play?

The contributors to this issue have emphasized different aspects of these questions, and various solutions are proposed in the following pages. In addition to biblical insights, these articles offer a range of theological, historical, and philosophical considerations regarding the authority and interpretation of Scripture. As always, our intent is to provide thoughtful reflection that will create dialogue about matters that are important to God’s people.

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A Shifting Ethos: Transitions in the Understanding of the Authority of Scripture in Churches of Christ

Allan J. McNicol

Late last year a fascinating book came to my attention. It was beautifully written and illustrated by a professional journalist and newspaper editor whose family has lived in the Central Texas area for well over a hundred years.¹ The main title immediately drew my attention. The book tells stories involving many colorful figures who served honorably to build up the body of Christ in this area. But why would the author give it such a puzzling title? *Choosing Sides*. What did he have in mind?

It did not take long to find out. Lovingly, but often with a streak of pain, Larry Jackson tells the story. He pulls no punches. Although we turn out to be a fellowship that has had considerable impact in Austin, there is also another strain present that permeates the history. We are a quarrelsome people. Over the years something like half a dozen clear divisions emerged among the churches with the result that fellow believers for long periods of time decided to meet separately. Indeed, a number of these divisions are now entrenched and appear to remain in place for the foreseeable future.

Interestingly, nearly all of the conflicts trend back to the same issue: How do we read and interpret the Scriptures as authoritative? To build on Jackson's concern, we are left with the impression that too much time and energy continue to be spent squabbling over the interpretation of texts. The unstated,

¹ Larry C. Jackson, *Choosing Sides: A History of the Churches of Christ in Austin 1847–2018* (La Grange, 2018).

underlying point of the book is clear: We need to do better, especially considering that, ironically, our movement began with a call for the unity of Christians on the basis of the fundamental teaching of the New Testament. Clearly, we do have a problem with the procedures we use for how the Scriptures function as authoritative. How do we fix it?

Jackson's account of the journey of Churches of Christ in Austin, I believe, is paradigmatic for the wider brotherhood. Often, if we do not agree with a particular way of reading certain Scriptures, we simply separate from one another. Needless to say this does not appear to be fruitful. Is there a way out of this malaise?

Looking More Closely at the Problem

If our people agree on anything it is the importance of the Scriptures. We wish to do as we always claim: to hold firmly to the same faith that the apostles passed on to the first-century followers of Jesus. The Scriptures are foundational for providing us with the resources to work toward this goal (2 Pet 1:16–23; 3:14–16; 1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:8; 3:8–10; 3:17). Already by the time of Jesus the Scriptures of the Jews were held to be authoritative for the people of God. Most of the earliest leaders of the church were Jews, and they inherited the belief that these writings functioned as “the deep structure” for construing the truth of the divine revelation.² As Charles E. Hill states:

The Christian church did not so much construct a doctrine of Scripture as inherit one. It succeeded to its conception of the diversity and authority of Holy Scripture, one might say, as bequeathed to it from the broad Jewish heritage in general.³

Indeed, Hill goes on to summarize the early patristic writer Hippolytus, “Even schismatics and heretics used, and had to use, the Holy Scriptures, for all knew

² I am indebted to Ben Meyer for the phraseology “deep structure.” Cf. Ben Meyer, *The Early Christians: Their World Mission and Self Discovery*, Good News Studies 16 (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1985), 18.

³ Charles E. Hill, “‘The Truth Above All Demonstration’: Scripture in the Patristic Period to Augustine,” in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 44.

the final court of appeal among the churches was the voice of God speaking in the Scripture.”⁴

I realize that the debate on the process of canonization continues to drone on, and many insist that it persisted into the fourth and fifth centuries. But I am disposed to conclude that, functionally, the New Testament Scriptures were in place and served authoritatively for the church by the middle of the second century of our era.⁵ There is widespread support in the academy for this position.

However, there is another issue about Scripture and authority, much less discussed among Restorationists, that demands closer attention, especially because of our investment on claiming to hold firmly to the same faith as the

⁴ Hill, “Truth Above All Demonstration,” 45. The quote summarizes Hippolytus, *Contra Noetum* 9.

⁵ I should note that, in keeping with what I have stated, most of the references to “the Scriptures” in our New Testament writings refer directly to the various Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible. Among the many examples in our New Testament is Jesus quoting from Psalm 118:22–23 in Matt 21:42, where he refers to the psalm as Scripture. This is not unusual. As to when the words and deeds of Jesus and the writings of the apostles are reckoned to be placed in this category, the process seems to point to a growing recognition of their special importance since the earliest days of the church. We have a small peek of how this works by looking at 2 Pet 3:15–16. There the writer draws attention to the existence of a collection of Paul’s letters that were in circulation. Although the unstable are reckoned to twist its meanings, the writer presumes this collection functions at the level of the Scriptures. Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, WBC 50 (Waco: Word Books, 1981), 330–34, notes that although the dating of 2 Peter still remains an open question, by the end of the first century there is evidence that various collections of Paul’s works circulated in the churches (1 Clement 47:1) with internal evidence from this era (cf. 1 Thess 5:27 and Col 4:15–16). By the early second century there is record of quotes of Jesus as Scripture (2 Clement 2:4–6).

Although the dating of the Gospels (despite the unjustified confident claims of many commentators) is still murky, there is enough evidence to indicate that by the early days of the second century of our era the words of Jesus and the apostles were held in the highest regard by the church. Given the composition of the Muratorian Fragment and Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies* later in the second century, together these works indicate widespread recognition that their New Testament was very close to what is in use in the church today. We will never know as much as we would like to know about the context of the writing and circulation of the fourfold Gospels and apostolic writings in the earliest period. What we do know is that from the beginning they were reckoned by the church as authoritative remembrances of the apostolic witness by all those in a position to speak responsibly on what took place.

apostles.⁶ The issue is this: since we hold so firmly to following the same faith as the apostles, what status do we attach to doctrinal/ecclesial development following the New Testament period? To address the pros and cons of this issue adequately doubtless demands a much lengthier analysis. Without question however, massive changes in matters of faith and ecclesiology, probably without precedent, took place in the first century. For example, consider the perception of Jesus before and after his resurrection. Before the resurrection Jesus was primarily a preacher and teacher in Israel. After the resurrection he was the heavenly Lord. And what about the turmoil over Paul's allowance of Gentile converts to be a people in full fellowship with God without keeping vital areas mandated by the Torah? Were the changes in the second century of our era and later times of Christian history any different in kind? Or does our commitment to Restorationism demand theologically that we conclude that the amalgam of twenty-seven small writings, representing the earliest perception of the faith of the apostles, read in conjunction with the Hebrew Scriptures, constitute the ultimate authority for what we do? I think the answer is yes. There is a difference in kind between how we read Scripture and how we treat doctrinal developments in the church at a later period. But it remains a matter for continued discussion.

Our Procedure

In this essay I will attempt to defend a version of the position that Restorationists are called to hold: maintain the same faith as the apostles passed on to the first-century followers. But I will do so with some equivocations. I believe strongly that the way Restorationists have preached the gospel over the last two hundred years sets forth a core understanding of what Jesus intended for his "little flock," the people of the New Covenant, to maintain. However, I also

⁶ Many scholars (especially Protestants) refer to this as the issue of Early Catholicism. No doubt this particular terminology goes back to developments set in motion by the Reformation. In German the term *Frühcatholicismus* is used widely. Generally speaking, it refers to notable changes beginning to develop in church leadership (area-wide bishops, etc.) and other significant areas of church life and doctrine as early as the second century. There was a tendency by some to consider that the monarchical bishop determined what constituted the work of the Spirit in the faith community. Thus, the critical question emerges as to whether the earliest Christianity ever had a single ecclesial identity in the era of the apostles only to enter into a process of incremental change sometime later? Cf. Meyer, *The Early Christians*, 15.

believe from time to time we have not honored the task that the early Restorationist leaders challenged us to complete. We have not been loyal to focusing intently on our basic standard of authority: teaching and especially living the faith that the apostles bequeathed to us.

Procedurally I will draw attention particularly to two contemporary areas in Churches of Christ that indicate significant trends that hinder our task. First, there is excessive attention paid in some quarters to turning the apostles' teaching into a legalistic blueprint. We need to be aware that the legacy of the apostles is not merely a set of static demands but a call to pursue a dynamic lifestyle. Second, in other quarters there is a growing tendency to take our eyes off the guiding light of full loyalty to the apostles teaching and, in search of some short-term benefits such as church growth or wider cultural acceptance, pitch our tents with generic evangelicalism. In my estimation, in their own way, both of these trends represent a strong set of hindrances to our contemporary witness. It allures us away from our central concern to be faithful to the new order of the people of God which Jesus directed the apostles to set in place.

Following this analysis, I plan to restate what I conceive to be the central features of the Restorationist project: to read and interpret the Scriptures as authoritative for holding the same faith that the apostles bequeathed to us. I believe this should be the central theological *discrimen* that should underscore our approach to how we conceive the authority of Scripture.⁷

The New Testament as a Blueprint

Some things make lifelong impressions. In my late teenage years one Lord's Day morning I walked by the foyer of my hometown church. There I noticed that a one-page sheet was on display with the arresting title "The Pattern of the New Testament Church." It consisted of a diagram featuring a set of boxes containing numerous scriptural texts all carefully displayed under titles such as "time and place of foundation," "elements of worship," and so on. Having grown up in a rural area, I was familiar with blueprints for automobiles, tractors, and building structures, but I had never seen one for the church.

⁷ According to David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 160, the term *discrimen* designates "a configuration of criteria that are in some way organically related to one another as reciprocal coefficients." In ordinary discussion, this means the essential features of a proposal needed to contribute to a coherent argument which we put on the table.

I must admit that at this time of my life the impression was very positive. My congregation had raised me to have a deep love for the Scriptures. Without dispute, *sola scriptura* was presumed to be normative. This pattern diagram seemed to provide a perfect layout on one page for what I needed to know about the biblical teaching regarding the church.

I later discovered that my appreciation was not unusual. The Scottish-Irish immigrants who poured into the American heartland and British Commonwealth countries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were heavily influenced by Evangelicals who had deep roots in various versions of Reformed theology. This model of outlining beliefs cut a broad swath across many of the Protestant faith communities of the era. It was presumed that one could discover an intrinsically perfect pattern in Scripture for all that is needed to live the Christian life. Now all one had to do was learn how to interpret it.

As early as 1809 Thomas Campbell, in his *Declaration and Address*, spoke in a certain peculiar logical discourse of the time. Language such as “express terms in teaching,” “approved precedents,” and “necessary deductions from a biblical premise” was often used to underscore procedures for interpreting Scripture.⁸ This language seemed more congruent with legal discussions about a constitution than with interpreting Scripture. To this day, this has continued to be an important factor in conservative Restorationist biblical interpretation.⁹ Just as a builder can only be successful if he follows the standard rules governing the work of professionals, so the exegete views the study of Scripture as a rational work of logic, seeking to determine what the divine architect has put in place for the church. Is this really the best way to determine apostolic teaching? It is my contention that somewhere along the line this hermeneutical approach for interpreting scriptural authority has taken us off the track.¹⁰

⁸ The language used by people who traded in this kind of terminology was not always exactly the same, but it was understandable among those who used it. I have drawn some of this phraseology from John Allen Hudson, *The Church in Great Britain* (London: Old Paths Book Club, 1948), 3.

⁹ It is worth noticing that a prominent book used in Restorationist circles, *Biblical Interpretation Principles and Practices: Studies in Honor of Jack Pearl Lewis*, ed. F. Furman Kearley, et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), stresses overwhelmingly the need to follow strict exegesis to arrive at the proper interpretation of the text. Campbell’s tendency to read the New Testament as our constitution is inherent in this volume.

¹⁰ Thomas H. Olbricht, “Hermeneutics,” in *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, ed. Douglas A. Foster, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 387–89. To many,

The truth is that much of the argumentation behind the model of conceiving of the New Testament as a blueprint emerged in certain European Puritan and Calvinist circles. It focused strongly on ways for voluntary communities of Christian believers (rather than the state) to determine the parameters for legitimate worship after the Reformation. In short, it was a tool for the times. True Restorationism returns to the first century. It wishes to be historically legitimate in terms of what was the core legacy of the apostles' teaching for the church. When we look at it this way, it is not a logical device but a much more dynamic way of reading Scripture that is needed. Scripture is meant to function as a dynamic word, not an architectural blueprint. I have studied the New Testament all of my life and am convinced that one of the best descriptions of what this collection is seeking to accomplish comes from another document that appeared about the same time in the earliest Christian communities. I refer to the writing called *The Didache: Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. Its opening line states, "There are two ways: one is the way of life; the other of death. There is a great difference between the two."¹¹ A way of life! That is what early Christian converts were expected to discover when they heard the books read that constitute our New Testament. In my judgment it should be the same today.

The Transmutation of Theological Allegiances

Due to my family situation these days I usually sit near the rear of the assembly that I attend. From this position I am able to observe how large numbers of people conduct themselves while they are involved in worship. One of the heartening observations I note is that when the minister announces the text for the sermon large numbers will turn to the passage (usually on their cell phones) and follow the reading. Even among millennials and young families this is a widespread practice. It is good to know that there are many who choose to pay close attention to the Scriptures even in a generation that has become suspicious of almost all claims to authority. But how do we process the Word? Here, it becomes a little more complicated.

this whole approach is outdated; but if we look at Larry Jackson's history of Churches of Christ in Austin, many of the divisions arose in this kind of milieu. Now, *Polishing the Pulpit*, arguably the largest representative annual gathering among leaders in Churches of Christ, remains open for invoking versions of this hermeneutical approach.

¹¹ Didache 1:1. This is my own translation of the Greek text.

Few realize that the phraseology “the authority of Scripture” is such an ambiguous issue. As we noticed in examining “the blueprint model,” scriptural authority was often treated as a straightforward logical issue. There we simply ask, “What does the text say, and is this word bound on the believer today?” But with contemporary sermons, Bible classes, and home fellowship groups, this is seldom how we encounter expositions of the text. Usually the text functions as a beginning point to move into the particular subject matter that the speaker has in mind. For example, how many times have you attended a class or heard a sermon on a parable of Jesus that does not focus on the point of the word in the text but provides an unusual phrase or metaphor that intrigues the expositor as opening up the possibility for a fresh way to view Christian life? The point that I am making is that in many cases Scripture is used as a trusted authority (something like the speeches of Abraham Lincoln that are used at a Kiwanis club), as a hook on which to hang some spiritual lesson.¹² All too often the actual word of the text and theological framework in which it occurs are treated as peripheral.

In my judgment this present state of affairs accounts for the neglect of our traditional emphasis on the norm of the apostles’ teaching concerning the importance of being the people of God of the new covenant. Increasingly, except for the appearance of a band, our preaching and teaching often resemble that of the multiplying number of non-denominational churches that have come up and spread like daisies throughout the country.¹³ I believe that is why many in contemporary Churches of Christ—not seeing or appreciating our theological *discrimen* of being a dynamic New Testament Church that intends to make a real difference in the religious world—gravitate to these other assemblies. This is particularly true with our youth. Sometimes parents are deeply troubled by decisions made by their children—often when they move to college or another community. They go elsewhere. Increasingly, though, what I see is that this parental remorse is often followed by a statement of relief. In a culture

¹² Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture*, 90–197.

¹³ Here I refer not so much to the theological orientation of these fellowships. Groups like Vineyard, Willow Creek, and Hillsong are usually mildly charismatic with a generic evangelical theology. But, like us, they are mostly independent, do claim to be non-denominational, and for many people their preaching and exposition of Scripture do not sound all that much different from many local Churches of Christ.

increasingly hostile to historic Christianity, the comment is often made that “at least our children are going somewhere!”

I am inclined to agree with many shrewd observers that this description of the situation faced in Churches of Christ is only a small part of a much wider phenomenon that is now well entrenched in American Protestant Christianity. Here I refer to the massive erosion of membership in traditional denominations such as Methodist, Presbyterians, Disciples, and Southern Baptists. In one way or another historic denominationalism is coming to represent an interim ecclesiology.¹⁴ Churches rapidly appear to be transitioning into a new formation of non-denominational fellowships which, at least for the time being, seem to be able to accommodate our increasingly secular culture.¹⁵ I believe that this wider trend that is taking place in American Christianity is primarily responsible for the present membership losses that we are facing today.

Beginning with the Campbells, we have always claimed that central to our existence is the demand to be obedient to the original apostolic teaching, and at the very heart of this concern stands the doctrine of the church. Its component parts constitute the fulcrum of the story of the people of God. It is the saving ark of salvation. Given the present circumstances, if we have anything to say to the religious world, it is this doctrine of the church, and this should be the time to say it and commend it as something to stand for! I believe that the narrative of Scripture comes to its zenith with this scriptural claim.¹⁶ With the founding of the church, the totality of God’s revelation, starting with creation, becomes comprehensible (Eph 5:23–27). This is where it speaks most authoritatively. The doctrine of the church, our “canon within the canon,” ought

¹⁴ Peter J. Leithart, *The End of Protestantism: Pursuing Unity in a Fragmented Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), has an interesting chapter which spells out this phenomenon. Leithart draws attention to a Methodist church in Florida that has almost completely become a generic evangelical community. It initiates the programs and procedures of the non-denominational churches even to the extent of almost never declaring in any of its publicity it is Methodist. It now has become the largest church in this particular city. I recommend this analysis to church leaders as a harbinger of future trends.

¹⁵ Leithart, *The End of Protestantism*, 149-161.

¹⁶ See Allan J. McNicol, *The Persistence of God’s Endangered Promises: The Bible’s Unified Story* (New York: Bloomsbury/T & T Clark, 2018), where I spend a whole volume arguing this point.

to sound this message to the religious world with heartened vigor. That is what we stand for!

Apostolic Teaching: The Authoritative Norm for a Restorationist Reading of Scripture

We have seen so far that the Churches of Christ, in the main a conservative fellowship, are staunch defenders of the proposition that the Scriptures are the norm for what we do. This is certainly true with the patternists and even those who decide to go elsewhere usually drift into other conservative fellowships. But for those who choose to maintain loyalty to our traditional *raison d'être* of restoring the New Testament church, how do we continue to construe an identifiable and workable model of authority?

In an article on this topic in an earlier volume of this journal, Tony Ash raised an important question on this point:

What kind of reality lies behind the Bible? Is it meant to be seen like a book of law? Is it a document in which we turn to the appropriate page, paragraph, and sub-paragraph to find the rule for a particular life situation? Is this what the authors of the Bible intended? Is this what God intended?¹⁷

From these questions, we might be tempted to conclude that this is difficult, so why try to do better? We might simplistically suggest, "Let us just seek to determine what the text is saying and leave it at that." But I think this is a mistake. We need to have a core, coherent, integrative vision that undergirds how we construe the diverse body of writings in the Bible. This is particularly true for Restorationists who base so much of their *discrimen* on the claim that Scripture is foundational because it unfolds the nature of the church that Jesus founded and the apostles developed.

Around two hundred years have elapsed since the time that a clarion call began to ring out, both in the United Kingdom and the American western frontier, that it was time to return to the original apostolic teaching as the basis for the unification of the church. Surely, to be faithful to this legacy, we should

¹⁷ Tony Ash, "The Authority of the Bible," *ICS Faculty Bulletin / Christian Studies* 2 (1981): 11. Ash goes on to suggest that most of the biblical writers did not state their arguments in constitutional prose. Psalms, Nahum, and Romans make their arguments in very different genres of expression.

work to honor its original insight and prescience—especially if it seems to be intuitively worthwhile. So, as I move to conclusion, I seek to propose how those earlier insights ought to be stated in contemporaneous terminology to form a working conception of scriptural authority for the church today.

Since the Campbells, we have learned much more about the details of the world in which Jesus and the apostles lived and functioned. Especially important is the greater appreciation we now have for the centrality of the influence of the story of Israel on both Jews and early Christians. Much of the Bible centers around the account of how God took a small tribal people and called them as his special possession (Deut 7:6–8). The culmination of this story is where we find New Testament Christianity embedded.

In Jesus' day, there was a tendency to divide the story of Israel into two eras: their age and the age to come. Many Jews believed that this was the time when the old age (the era since creation) was ending and a new, exciting age was at hand. More importantly, Jesus and the apostles viewed themselves precisely as living at the intersection of these two worlds.

Terminology representing this belief is common in the New Testament. Starting with the ministry of John the Baptist we learn of this message. “The time (of the new order) is at hand.” The people of God need to repent and prepare for it. “It is the last days,” and “the time has come.” The earlier way of telling the legacy of Abraham and his descendants is now about to be subject to drastic revision.

Jesus, the teacher of divine origin, reinforces this message of John. He too begins his mission by proclaiming that a new kingdom was at hand in Israel. Of course his ministry was cut short by the opposition of Israel's temple authorities who handed him over to the Romans to be put to death. They thought his ministry must be obliterated because it was perceived to be a revolutionary threat to those who were determined to keep the old order. At his crucial last meal with his closest followers, Jesus takes the bread and cup and uses these elements as the basis to interpret his death. Through this offering of his life Jesus states that his sacrifice will enable those who accept its benefits to have a

place with “the little flock” (the apostles) he had gathered to prepare Israel for the new age.¹⁸

Through the work of Paul and others, we Gentiles have been welcomed into this community of the new covenant or age. Through our baptism into Christ we are to adopt a behavioral existence in keeping with the demands of the new age. We now have become an integral part of the new creation (Gal 3:26–29; 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17; Rev 21:1–4).¹⁹

Given the importance of these first-century events, the New Testament Scriptures simply function as a dynamic record of the founding of the new order of the people of God. They supplement the story of the first or old order of God’s people. Put together, in being read this way, this narrative represents the faith of the apostles. It is the authoritative norm for a Restorationist reading of Scripture. The faith once delivered to the saints is embedded in the Scriptures (Jude 3; 2 Tim 3:16–17). It is the word of life that separates us from the way of death. It is the authority from which we speak. May we extend to it the centrality and respect it deserves in our proclamation.

Conclusion

I opened this essay by picking up on the drift of Larry Jackson’s narration of the journey of Churches of Christ in Austin. As noted, I see it as a metaphor for the story of the journey taken by European immigrants (especially the Scottish-Irish) on their westward push along the American frontier. Restorationism was in the air as a viable theological option, and the descendants of the Stone-Campbell movement reaped an abundant harvest of adherents.

Still the journey has not been a bed of roses. An over reliance on certain hermeneutical procedures drawn from earlier forms of Protestant orthodoxy has resulted in a pattern of unfortunate divisions. Examples of divisions, such as whether the fruit of the vine should be served in “one cup” or “multiple cups,” that resulted from use of these procedures could easily be multiplied. On the other hand, in recent decades a growing number of those in

¹⁸ For more details see my article, “Till He Come: The Lord’s Supper and the End Time,” *Christian Studies* 30 (2018): 57–69.

¹⁹ Nils Dahl, in his majestic study, “Christ, Creation and the Church,” in *Jesus and The Memory of the Early Church: Essays by Nils Alstrup Dahl* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), 120–40, shows how the New Testament writers claimed that the new age or era is the climactic fulfillment of everything God put in place with the first creation.

Restorationist fellowships seem to be discounting their association with the heritage and adopting an attitude toward Scripture much more in keeping with the position of contemporary evangelicals. Thus, it seems, with respect to the authority of Scripture we have either been too narrow or too accommodating.

In this essay I have argued that our heritage of Restorationism is the crown jewel of our fellowship. As a key principle it is a valid theological *discrimen*. Objections, several noted briefly, ought to be carefully addressed. But in the end our task is to be faithful to the apostles' teaching, and I contend our basic approach is the most straightforward way to do it.

I have suggested we ought to give special attention to reading the Scripture as the narrative story of the people of God as a guiding principle for our exegesis. This narrative climaxes in Jesus' inauguration of the new covenant and his creation of "the little flock," the divine community of the new era. The apostles took initial leadership of this flock from the Good Shepherd. Our task today is simply to be faithful to this heritage and maintain its key tenets until the end of the age.

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